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Annwyl Syr / Madam

Consultation on the future of tertiary education in Wales

I write in response to the [current Welsh Government consultation](#) on the future of tertiary education.

By way of background, the Academy of Social Sciences exists to promote social sciences in the UK for public benefit. We are a national academy and the UK professional body for academics, practitioners and learned societies in the social sciences. Our work is informed and supported by 1,700 leading social scientist Fellows together with 47 member Learned Societies that cover the main disciplines and sub-disciplines in the social science sector. This gives us a reach of some 90,000 social scientists in the UK.

The social sciences are the study of contemporary societies, economies, people and places. They are distinct from both the humanities and arts sector (which includes English, Welsh, history, religious studies, and music for example) and from the maths, physical and biological sciences (STEM) sector. The social science disciplines include: business & management, economics, geography, politics & international studies, psychology (social & behavioural), and sociology, all of which currently rank in the top 12 subject choices at A-level. The social sciences also include anthropology, architecture & planning, criminology, development studies, education, law, regional studies, social work and social policy, social aspects of healthcare, and tourism and leisure studies, which by and large do not figure in school curricula.

Our thoughts on the five specific challenges in the consultation are set out below. At a macro level, we welcome the Welsh Government's long-overdue engagement with the fundamental challenges facing Welsh tertiary education, and the existential nature of the crisis with which the sector is currently grappling.¹ None of the options facing either the current Welsh Government or the one formed after May's Senedd elections are without adverse political consequences. Nevertheless, clear leadership about what the Welsh Government sees the tertiary sector as being for, and funding to align to those priorities, will go some way towards addressing the structural challenges facing the sector. Fundamentally, the question the Welsh Government needs to answer is whether future reforms are aimed at creating a new national education and

¹ See, for example:

- Jack, P. (2025) "['Existential crisis': Welsh universities face £70 million deficit](#)", *Times Higher Education*, 4 February 2025.
- Williams, H. (2025) "[Welsh universities are ailing](#)", *UnHerd*, 11 August 2025.
- UK Parliament (2025) "[Welsh Affairs Committee statement on securing the future of Welsh universities](#)", UK Parliament website, 26 June 2025.

research system for Wales, or whether they seek to shore up Wales' place within a UK university ecosystem. Either of those are defensible policies intellectually and philosophically, but the contexts (financial and structural) now facing the sector dictate that no government could successfully ride these two horses at once. Our comments below are written with this in mind.

Participation and equality of opportunity

We strongly support the framing of participation and equality as foundational to a fair and sustainable tertiary system. Evidence² from the Wales Centre for Public Policy demonstrates that socio-economic background and deprivation remain significant determinants of access to, and progression through, post-16 education in Wales, with learners from the most deprived communities substantially less likely to participate and succeed in tertiary pathways. This persistent inequality highlights the need for policy interventions that address retention, attainment, and progression outcomes, not solely initial access.

This is important context given the decisions the Welsh Government needs to take about future student funding. If future reforms on student funding are predicated on trying to incentivise students to take up 'key' courses (such as nursing, healthcare, or teaching) and for those students to stay in Wales, then this is quite possible to do through mechanisms like debt forgiveness. However, the questions Welsh Government need to ask is what this would mean for Wales' ability to offer a truly comprehensive HE system and how to avoid adverse impact on students from poorer backgrounds for whom certain course will become unaffordable.

The Academy would strongly argue that protecting disciplinary breadth (and research excellence) is essential for Wales' future, especially if it wants to become less reliant on funding from UK Government, and provide the skills and competencies needed for a flourishing and broad based economy, and for a caring society. A Wales which only offered a restricted selection of courses to students – or one which financially penalised students from poorer backgrounds who wanted to pursue studies in subjects outside of the Welsh Government's priorities – would not only be turning its back on a proud tradition of scholarship within the social sciences (and indeed the humanities), but also doing so against a backdrop of the social sciences delivering transformative research for the nation in the here and now³.

Competition and collaboration

Research across the UK suggests that unmoderated competition can exacerbate institutional stratification and regional inequalities, often disadvantaging community-facing providers and learners with fewer resources.⁴ The Academy supports policy frameworks that actively incentivise collaboration across universities, particularly where this strengthens progression pathways and reduces unnecessary duplication. However, the impetus for this needs to be bottom-up from institutions rather than top-down by government. It is unlikely that the Welsh Government could legally prevent competition between universities, and it is equally unlikely that institutions would actively choose for this to happen either. Funding mechanisms could be altered to deliberately 'break' institutions and force them to come to the table and be remodelled / merged – but we

² Huxley, K. & Davies, R. (2024) [Understanding inequity in tertiary education in Wales: analysis of linked data](#), Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy.

³ See, for example:

- Our [recent Senedd event](#) hearing about research from social scientists at Swansea University evaluating the Welsh Government's WarmHubs programme, and on the educational experiences of care-experienced children in Wales.
- Our case study of [research from Cardiff University](#) using social science to detect online harms. This helped the Welsh and UK Government tackle the over 140,000 hate crimes recorded by police in England & Wales in 2024.
- Our [podcast episode](#) with Dr Ed Jones, a social scientist at Bangor University, whose research explores the factors leading to the decline of the high street and what could be done to revive it.

⁴ Sibitea, L. (2024) [Major challenges for education in Wales](#), London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

would argue strongly that this would not be a healthy starting point for reimagining a sector which would be capable of embracing a different future.

Financial sustainability

The financial challenges facing Welsh universities are well-rehearsed elsewhere⁵, and a lot of the potential remedies are bound up in other elements of this consultation (not least on whether / how to have fewer but more sustainable institutions, and whether / how to reduce subsidies for non-priority courses). As stated above, none of the options are easy ones and the Welsh Government needs to strike a balance between creating long-term funding models which provide institutional stability while safeguarding support for disadvantaged learners and maintaining Wales's research and innovation capacity.

Within this, however, it would be beneficial to have greater clarity from Welsh Government on its policy position over the (un)sustainability of some of the nation's universities. Fundamentally, would the Welsh Government step in to protect and secure an institution on the verge of financial collapse? And just as importantly, would the Welsh Government allow institutions to close unaffordable campuses and leave parts of Wales as 'HE deserts'? Would there ever be sufficient political consensus for this to even be possible?

Delivering for the economy of the future

Despite the breadth and depth of social science disciplines, the skills which they teach, and the fulfilling (and well-remunerated) careers to which they lead, there is currently a lack of named recognition of the social sciences within Wales' school curriculum. We would urge for this clarification to be made so that students can more readily see and understand the many career pathways that exist. As we set out in a recent report⁶, the social sciences are popular at school and university and equip students to understand the contemporary, fast-changing and complex human world in which we all live and the challenges and opportunities that face it. Social scientists work across all industries and sectors, deploying a variety of skills to the benefit of society. Some social science professions – including law, accountancy and planning, for examples – are closely linked to particular subjects and require specialist qualifications. Other roles relate directly to the knowledge and skills specific to a subject, for example, geospatial analysts trained in geography, operations managers trained in business and management, economists working in the NHS as programme evaluators, political scientists working for polling companies, and psychologists working on organisation behaviours. Many other jobs and careers are open to all social scientists, making use of the wide range of transferable skills gained by studying a social science degree. There is therefore much sense in retaining a wide breath of subjects in post-16 education.

As set out in relation to participation and equality of opportunity, we would emphasise the importance of Wales maintaining a truly comprehensive HE system, so that the Welsh economy can tap into the full range of skills, expertise and insights it needs – including those from our social science disciplines which will remain essential to the economies and societies / communities of Wales' future.

Demographic change and lifelong learning

We note the consultation document's data on demographic trends, which further reinforces the need (set out above) for our HE institutions to be built on a solid financial footing such that they can withstand short-/medium-term changes to demographics.

We note the document's assertion that "*Low qualification levels remain linked to higher*

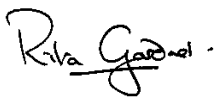
⁵ Dickinson, J. (2026) [Welsh higher education is running out of wriggle room](#), WonkHE website.

⁶ Campaign for Social Science (2025) [The contemporary relevance of the social sciences](#), London: Sage / Academy of Social Sciences.

unemployment, underlining the importance of targeted interventions for adult learning and skills development, particularly in basic skills areas such as literacy and numeracy, as well as vocational training". While we support this for some demographics, we would add that the lower numbers of 16-18 year-olds over the coming years potentially also adds an opportunity for higher qualification levels amongst our young people as competition for places within institutions potentially falls. However, allied to this should be a greater focus from Welsh Government on conferral rates and non-continuation rates for undergraduate degrees which compare unfavourably to those in the other UK nations.

I hope these comments will be of assistance to the next Welsh Government as they grapple with these critical matters. My colleagues and I would be only too happy to speak further about these issues if it would be of assistance.

Yn gywir,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rita Gardner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underlining the name.

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